

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

# The GreenMan



## Sage Advice About Salvia

Few plants have commanded such a central role in human history as common garden sage. First revered for its medicinal properties in antiquity, this unassuming member of the mint family was held sacred to the Greek and Roman gods, traded by the Dutch for tea from China, and has been revered by herbalists for millennia, from Dioscorides and Galen to your local GNC outlet.

Common sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is, however, but one member of the substantial genus *Salvia*, which actually takes its botanical name from the Latin *salvus* for "well" or "sound" (also *salvere* "to be in good health"), echoing its earliest association with curative and life-extending abilities.

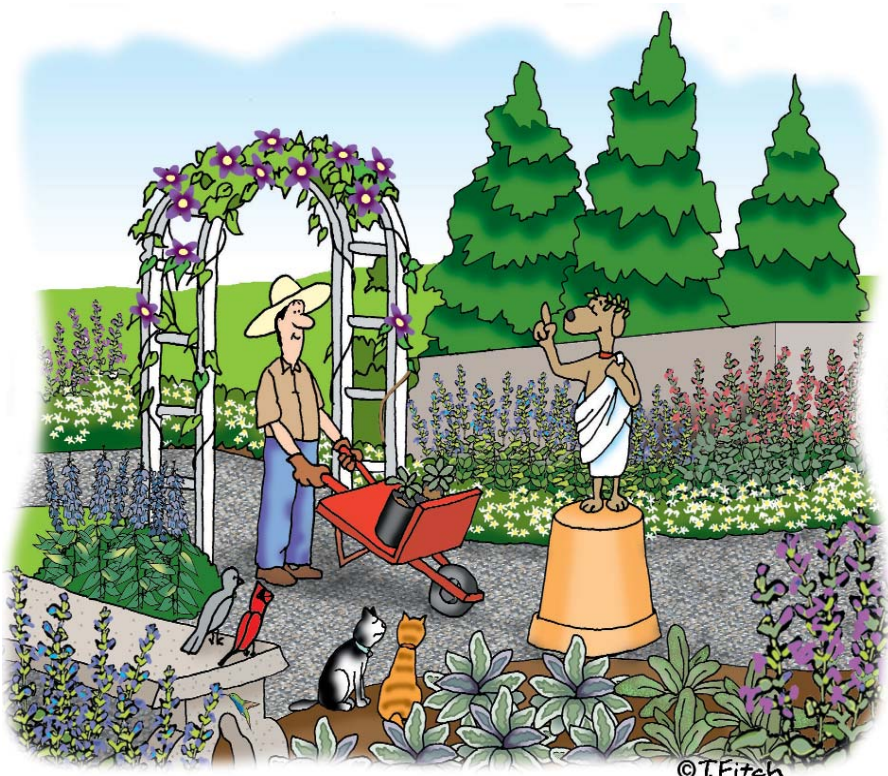
Today, thanks to plant hunters and hybridizers, roughly 900 species of salvia are found worldwide. And while few can promise immortality or favor with the gods, probably a dozen or so can liven up your garden, spice up your kitchen and generally provide a healthy habitat for butterflies and hummingbirds.

Limiting your choices is the hard part. My friend, garden writer and herb guru Kathy Fisher, once noted that of the 900 or so species of salvia, about 899 are worth growing.

And why not? Consider a flower palette ranging from lipstick red and magenta to salmon, pink, white, and luscious blues which mirror the sky and deepen to violet and inky-blackish. The foliage on varied species can be lime or dark green, creamy white, or a mixture of pinks, purple, white, and green.

And while you might think that common sage is important enough for its culinary and medicinal applications (now a valued antioxidant),

there are outstanding varieties which combine flavor and aroma with pure artistry. Golden garden sage (*S. officinalis* 'Icterina') features a swirling variegated pattern of golden yellow and green; purple sage has matte purple leaves which age to a soft green color; 'Berggarten' sage has very large silvery-gray fuzzy leaves; and 'Tricolor' sage with gray-green foliage splotted with pale pink, purple, or cream.



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Most culinary sages feature lilac-blue flowers, some with dark purple sepals, save for 'Albiflora,' a real show-off with pure white flowers. Best of all, the scent and flavor of sage bestirs delicious memories of Thanksgiving, family, turkey and stuffing — although the herb is well-suited and renowned for use in tea, or with pork, soups, sausage, duck, cheese, various egg dishes, and savory breads. Remember that fresh leaves are appreciably stronger in flavor than dried, and that harvesting in the early morning provides the highest level of essential oils. For drying purposes, harvest in spring before flower stalks appear.

All of the *officinalis* sages are tolerant of heat and humidity, especially 'Berggarten,' and most should survive all but the harshest winters. True garden sage is the hardiest of the lot, but all will become leggy after several years and are best replaced at that time.

In the wider world of salvia, you will find species suitable as ground covers and edging plants, hanging baskets, and even annual shrubs or hedges. As most ornamental salvias come to us from Mexico and South America, they are too tender to survive the winter, and can either be treated as annuals, or they can be planted in containers and moved to an indoor location prior to frost. Personally, I do not have the space to overwinter my favorite salvia, blue anise sage (*S. guaranitica*), a cobalt blue hummingbird magnet, which

becomes a five feet bush by mid-summer, but as salvias propagate easily from tip cuttings, I simply snip off three or four shoots in the fall, root them in water or a sterile medium, and care for these offspring through the winter care until they return to the garden.

Among some of other deservedly popular varieties are grape-scented sage (*S. melissodora*), whose pale blue blossoms exude an almost intense grape soda-like perfume aroma, unique in a genus where most flowers have a negligible scent.

'Cleveland' sage is heralded as the most fragrant variety of all sages. While most sages release their aroma after brushing against the foliage, 'Cleveland' readily wafts its scent with the slightest of breezes.

Buckeyes beware! The plant was actually discovered in California, not Ohio, and was named after the nineteenth century plant collector, Daniel Cleveland, who first spotted the silvery-grey foliage on an expedition.

Pineapple sage (*S. elegans*) is one of the most popular salvias owing to the fresh-cut pineapple scent released whenever its leaves are bruised. It also sports brilliant — and edible — red flowers, appearing in late summer through fall. Pineapple sage is also one of the last great hummingbird plants to bloom in late autumn, and provides the balance of vital nectar needed by migrating ruby-throated hummers as they head south. Scarlet pineapple sage has larger, deeper colored

blooms, and the cultivar 'Frieda Dixon' has pink flowers.

Autumn sage (*S. greggii*) provides an abundance of drought-tolerant cultivars with non-stop and profuse blooming habits. Easily found examples are 'Maraschino' (like the cherry) with scarlet flowers; 'Wild Watermelon' in fuchsia; aptly named 'Plum Wine' and 'Raspberry Royale'; 'Moonlight' with pale yellow blooms, and 'Desert Blaze,' which contrasts fire engine red flowers against creamy-white and green variegated foliage.

From ancient Greek physicians to a solitary planter on the patio, a world of salvias awaits to enhance the garden. Now that's sage advice!

### A Sampler of Salvia Species

*S. apiana* — White Sage  
*S. argentea* — Silver Sage  
*S. azurea* — Azure Sage  
*S. clevelandii* — Cleveland Sage  
*S. coccinea* — Scarlet Sage  
*S. discolor* — Peruvian Sage  
*S. dorisiana* — Fruit Sage  
*S. elegans* — Pineapple Sage  
*S. farinacea* — Mealycup Sage  
*S. greggii* — Autumn Sage  
*S. guaranitica* — Brazilian/Blue Anise Sage  
*S. koyamae* — Japanese Yellow Sage  
*S. leucantha* — Mexican Bush Sage  
*S. lyrata* — Lyre-leafed Sage  
*S. madrensis* — Forsythia Sage  
*S. melissodora* — Grape-scented sage  
*S. officinalis* — Common Sage  
*S. patens* — Gentian Sage  
*S. sclarea* — Clary Sage  
*S. splendens* — Bedding Sage  
*S. uliginosa* — Bog Sage  
*S. verticillata* — Lilac Sage  
*S. viridis* — Painted Sage



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

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